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Summer Raptors On Steens Mountain

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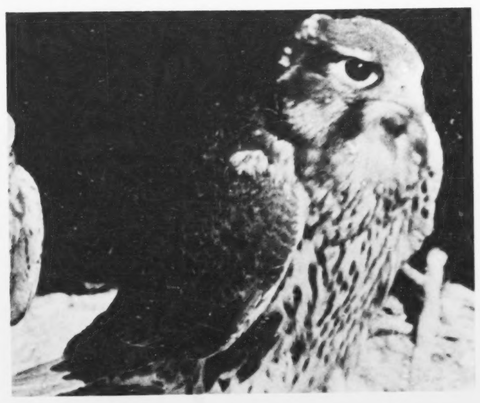
Welcome To Oregon's High Desert And Steens Mountain!

The Bureau of Land Management's Burns District includes more than 3.5 million acres in southeastern Oregon. Steens Mountain, 60 miles south of Burns, has a wide range of topography, vegetation and wildlife. The upper elevations of Steens Mountain provide an excellent area to observe birds of prey, or raptors, during the summer.

This pamphlet was prepared to help you identify some of the raptors found on Steens Mountain. It is keyed to the upper elevations along the loop road. Wing spans and body lengths given are averages for adult birds. Remember, all birds of prey are protected by state law.

Enjoy your visit to the Burns District!

Steens Mountain



PRAIRIE FALCON
(Falco mexicanus)

Prairie falcons have long, pointed wings, usually brown. Dark axillar (wing pit) feathers are conspicuous in flight. Males are about one-third smaller than females.

They are found throughout western North America, usually in open country. Prairie falcons reside yearlong at Steens Mountain. Eyries, or nests, are on ledges or cliffs that usually consist of a depression in the sand or gravel.

Diet consists of birds, small mammals, reptiles and occasionally insects. Ground squirrels are a favorite.

Prairie falcons have a low, swift, strong flight with a rapid wingbeat. They dive spectacularly, sometimes exceeding 150 m.p.h.

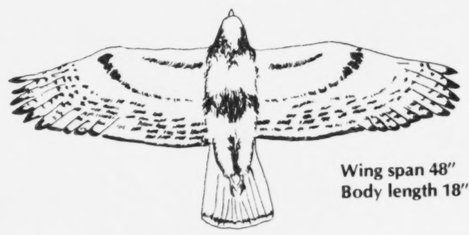
Wing span 40″
Body length 16″

RED-TAILED HAWK
(Buteo jamaicensis)

Two color phases and plumage variation can make identification difficult. Tails on adults are usually a light salmon color on the underside and reddish above. Adults generally show light brown head markings, white chest, and often an indistinct brown belly band.

The red-tailed hawk's range is from North to Central America. Trees, cliffs, and at times, old eagle's nests serve as homes. Young are fledged by late July, and are commonly seen in groups of five or more.

Ground squirrels and sage voles are two favorites of the red-tailed hawk's wide-ranging diet. A versatile hunter, the bird is the most common buteo, or soaring hawk, in North America. It is usually the most abundant raptor on Steens Mountain. The broad, rounded tail is a useful identification trait.



Wing span 48″
Body length 18″

GOLDEN EAGLE
(Aquila chrysaetos)

Adults are brownish-black with golden feathers on the crown of the head. Immature birds are brownish-black with white underwings and a white tail band. At least four years are needed before they attain adult plumage.

Golden eagles are found year-round on Steens Mountain. They inhabit North America, Europe and Asia. Nesting occurs along valley rims, cliffs, trees and manmade structures. They commonly use alternate nests in different years. Nesting begins in late January through March with young fledged by mid-July. Some nests are massive accumulations of twigs.

Golden eagles prefer jackrabbits, but will also feed on ground squirrels, cottontail rabbits and other prey. They are often maligned as livestock killers, but this is rare. They are the largest raptor on Steens Mountain, and may be seen riding the wind currents to great heights.

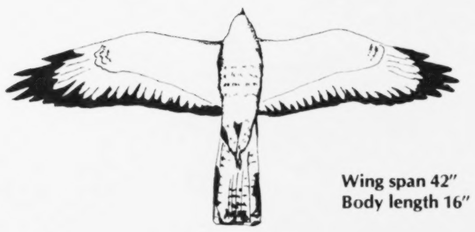
Wing length 78″
Body length 32″

MARSH HAWK
(Circus cyaneus)

Males are light gray above with light underparts. Females are buff above with brown streaks below. A white rump patch is prominent on both sexes. Immature birds resemble adult females, but color variation can occur.

Marsh hawks are yearlong residents of Steens Mountain. They inhabit North America, South America and Eurasia. Streamsides, marshes and rangelands are favorite nesting sites. They are most commonly seen in open country.

Marsh hawks feed heavily on mice, but take other prey, too. These slender, long-tailed hawks are usually seen in a low broken flight with a tilting glide. Wings are strongly elevated above the body. They often hover while hunting.



Wing span 42″
Body length 16″

AMERICAN KESTREL
(Falco sparverius)

American kestrels (sparrow hawks) are probably the most colorful of all raptors on Steens Mountain. The red, blue and rust colors of this small falcon make it easy to spot. Females have several bands on the tail while males have only one band.

They are found on Steens Mountain spring through fall. They are commonly found in the northern United States and Canada. Kestrels are very adaptable for a falcon in selecting nest sites. Cliff crevices and tree cavities are often used, but they can also be spotted in abandoned buildings and old magpie nests.

Their diet consists of a variety of small birds, mammals and insects. Wingless grasshoppers are a favorite during the summer in the higher elevations. Kestrels often hover on rapidly beating wings. Some years they are numerous during the summer in the subalpine vegetation zone.

Wing span 21″
Body length 9″

Photo courtesy of Larry Ditto

TURKEY VULTURE
(Cathartes aura)

Turkey vultures are one of the largest birds seen on Steens Mountain, exceeded only by the golden eagle. In flight, turkey vultures may be distinguished by their conspicuously short neck and two-toned black-silvery plumage on their broad wings. They soar with wings held in a slight V. Their tail is long.

Turkey vultures are spring through fall residents. They commonly nest in cliffs and caves, but have been recorded nesting on the ground or in hollow stumps. No nest is constructed, eggs are laid on the bare ground. Young are fledged in August.

Most of the turkey vulture use on Steens Mountain is at the lower and intermediate elevations. They are found from southern Canada throughout North and South America. They are carrion eaters and do not kill prey.

Wing Span 72″
Body length 30″

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